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ABSTRACT

The study examined social status as determined by conceptions of friendships, perceptions of social competencies, and behavior in school in 23 learning disabled (LD) Caucasian boys, 8-11 years old; 23 nonLD controls matched for age, sex, race, IQ, socioeconomic status, and homeroom; and 141 nonLD children both boys and girls, in the third grade classrooms attended by the experimental and control groups. Scores on the Perceived Competence Scale, Interpersonal Understanding Interview, and Behavior Problem Checklist were analyzed. Results revealed that LD Ss differed significantly from their nonLD peers in the number of friendship nominations received. LD Ss did not differ significantly from nonLD Ss in perceptions of social competencies. Teachers observed personality problems significantly more often in LD Ss than in control Ss. Reasons for LD Ss' relative lack of popularity were thought to include inaccuracy in assessing social relations and lower ability in grasping nuances involved in making friends and resolving conflicts. (CL)

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Social Relations in Children with Learning Disabilities Revisited: Social Status, Perceived Social Competence, and Conceptions of Friendship

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Schools provide a setting in which children make friends, gain social approval, and learn about themselves through interactions with others. Theoreticians such as Sullivan (1953) and researchers such as De Apodaca & Cowen (1982) contend that these social experiences are critical for psychological development and adjustment. For children with learning disabilities (LD), however, school may not provide these important positive interpersonal relationships. In fact, poor peer relations has been cited by Bryan (1978) as one of the identifying features of this group of children who possess at least average intelligence yet show a significant discrepancy between intellectual potential and academic achievement as a function of impairment in one or more psychological processes, although they are not mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, sensory impaired, or economically and culturally disadvantaged.

Sociometric studies by investigators such as Bryan (1974, 1976) and Bruininks (1978a, 1978b) have shown consistently that LD children are rated lower on measures of peer acceptance and higher on measures of peer rejection than their nonLD peers. These findings have stimulated scientific inquiry into the possible determinants of LD children's relatively low social status. The major goal of the present study was to assess LD children's social status and explore three possible determinants: social competence, conceptions of friendship, and behavior in school.

Previous research suggests that LD children are less accurate than their nonLD peers at assessing their social status. Bruininks (1978a, b) found that LD children were significantly more likely than nonLD children to perceive

their social status to be higher than it actually was. This finding suggests that LD children may perceive themselves to be as socially competent as their peers and therefore fail to take any necessary measures to improve their relationships with others. The present study compared LD and nonLD children's perceptions of their social competencies.

Clinical-developmental psychologists such as Selman (1980) and Serafica (1982) have hypothesized that a child's conception of friendship may be related to his or her behavior with friends. Gottman, Gonso, & Rasmussen (1975) reported that third- and fourth-graders who scored high on knowledge of how to make friends were popular among their friends. Furthermore, Selman (1976) found that although positive peer sociometric ratings did not correlate significantly with interpersonal understanding stage, increasing negative judgment of a child by peers was correlated negatively and significantly with decreasing level of interpersonal understanding. These findings suggest that a low level of interpersonal understanding may result in a child's receiving low peer ratings. Since previous research (Selman, 1980) has demonstrated a lag in development of interpersonal understanding in children with learning and emotional problems, the present study sought to determine whether LD children differ significantly from their nonLD peers in their conceptions of friendship.

Last, LD children's low social status has been attributed also to their classroom behavior. Farnham-Diggory (1978) has suggested that it is difficult for the LD child to adjust to a school setting. A review by Tarver and Hallahan (1974) concluded that LD children are more easily distracted in the

classroom than nonLD children. In turn, disruptive children in the classroom are not viewed as desirable companions by their peers. Hence, the present study also compared the problem behaviors of LD and nonLD children in the school setting.

Methodology

The sample consisted of: (1) an experimental group of 23 caucasian, LD boys, ages 8 to 11 years; (2) a control group of 23 nonLD boys matched for age, race, IQ, SES, and homeroom; and (3) a sociometric group consisting of 141 nonLD boys and girls in the third grade classrooms attended by the experimental and control groups.

Subjects were recruited from 8 cooperating schools in a predominantly white middle-class, suburban, semi-rural Mid-western community. All of the LD subjects had been diagnosed by a school psychologist, based on criteria established by the State Department of Special Education, following federal guidelines. This involved computing a discrepancy score representing the deviation of the child's IQ and achievement test scores from the means and standard deviations attained in standardizing these tests for children of the same age. Twelve LD children's discrepancy scores fell between 1-2 standard deviations (SD) from the mean for his age group, six had scores signifying 2 or more SDs, and for five children, the data were not available. Table 1 depicts tests scores and educational experience of the experimental group.

Social status was assessed by asking the children to name their best friends in school. In addition, they rated how well they liked their classmates on Likert-type visual scales.

Children's perceptions of their social competence were measured through the Perceived Competence Scale devised by Harter (1979, 1982) which also measures a child's perceptions of his or her competencies in the physical and cognitive domain, as well as his or her general sense of self-esteem. The scale yields four separate scale scores, one for each variable. Although the scale was designed for group administration, it was individually administered and the items were read aloud to the children in the present study.

Conceptions of friendship were assessed using a component of Selman and Jacquette's (1979) Interpersonal Understanding Interview in which children hear a story dilemma about friendship and respond to accompanying probe questions regarding the child's thinking on six issues: Formation, Closeness and intimacy, Trust and reciprocity, Jealousy and exclusion; Resolving conflicts, and Termination. Responses are assigned a stage score ranging from 0 to 4, consistent with Selman's (1980) description that conceptions of friendship emerge in the following sequence: Stage 0 wherein friendship is defined as momentary physicalistic play relations, Stage 1 at which friendship is conceptualized as one-way assistance, Stage 2 when it is defined as fairweather cooperation, Stage 3 when it is viewed as an intimate and mutually shared relationship, and Stage 4 when it is thought of as an autonomous interdependent relationship. Initially, a single stage score was assigned to each concept or response to a standard question or probe. Then, a stage score was assigned for each of the six interpersonal issues, using a procedure which determined the major level at which the child responded. Last, the scores for the six interpersonal issues were averaged, using numerical equivalents provided in the Scoring Manual.

Problem Behaviors were assessed using The Behavior Problem Checklist (BPC), a 55-item checklist for problem behaviors in the classroom, designed by Quay and Peterson (1975) to be completed by teachers. Scoring involves tallying the behavior problem items corresponding to each of five scales: conduct-problem, personality-problem, inadequacy-immaturity, socialized delinquency, and psychotic behavior. The measure also yields a score for the total number of behavior problems.

Results

Social status was examined by performing separate one-way ANOVAs on each of the following dependent variables: number of nominations given, number of nominations received, number of liking ratings given, and number of liking ratings received. LD children differed significantly from their nonLD peers in the number of friendship nominations received which were fewer (F, $(1, 45) = 6.39$, p .05). When reciprocal nominations and reciprocal ratings of liking were analyzed, respectively, a significant group difference was found only for the latter. LD children were less likely to reciprocate a peer's liking (F $(1, 45) = 5.6$, p .05).

In regard to determinants, LD children were not found to differ significantly from the nonLD ones in their perceptions of their social competencies. Similar results were obtained for all other variables tapped by the Perceived Competence Scale .

Chi-square analysis of the highest stage scores exhibited did not reveal a significant group difference. In the LD group, the highest understanding was at Stage 2 for 20 children and at Stage 1 for 3 children. For the nonLD group, the highest stage score was 2 for 22 children and 1 for one child.

When separate ANOVAs were performed on the average level of friendship concepts and stage scores for each of the six interpersonal issues, significant group differences emerged ($F(1, 45) = 4.65$ p .05). LD children had significantly lower average scores on conceptions of friendship and in their thinking about such issues as formation ($F(1, 45) = 6.73$, p .05) and conflict resolution ($F(1, 36) = 4.68$, p .05). These results are shown in Table 2 which also shows that for termination, trust and reciprocity, LD children tend to score higher than their controls, though not significantly so.

One-way ANOVAs performed on each of The Behavior Problem Checklist scale scores and the total score indicated that the teachers observed personality problems significantly more often in the LD group than in the control group. Differences between groups for the other types of behavior problems and the total number of problems were not significant. These results are shown in Table 3.

Discussion

The sociometric results obtained in the present study are consistent with previous research indicating that LD children are less likely to be nominated as friends than nonLD children. Other results suggest that this relative lack of popularity may be related to their own difficulty in reciprocating liking. Since liking is an important basis of friendship at this age, LD children may be missing opportunities for increasing positive peer relations. Furthermore, the finding that they rate themselves about as high in social competence as their nonLD counterparts, despite objective evidence of their relatively low social status, supports Bruininks (1978a, b) earlier finding that they are less accurate at assessing social relations. Because of this, they may not make the fine adjustments so often necessary for smooth interpersonal relations.

The present study also revealed that although the LD children had reached about as high an understanding of friendship as the nonLD children, there was greater variability in their performance such that, on the average, they exhibited significantly lower levels of social reasoning, particularly in regard to formation and conflict resolution. This difficulty in grasping the nuances involved in making friends and resolving conflicts may contribute to their receiving fewer nominations.

Finally, the teachers of the LD children in the present study did not observe them to be as disruptive in the classroom as previous research has suggested. Instead, they found them to have personality problems indexed by such behaviors as shyness, social withdrawal, feelings of inferiority, lack of self-confidence, anxiety and fearfulness. In other words, although LD children did not differ significantly from their nonLD peers in their assessments of their social competencies and general self-esteem on the Perceived Competence Scale, their teachers observed more often in them than in the controls the behaviors indicative of social skills deficits, low self-esteem, and negative emotional states. This finding further supports the hypothesis that LD children are less accurate in assessing their social status and abilities.

In conclusion, the present study found that LD children, compared to nonLD peers, are less popular, less likely to reciprocate liking, show on the average a less mature understanding of friendship, and more personality problems. Because of the small sample size and the number of one-way ANOVAs performed, these findings should be considered tentative. Replication and follow-up are needed before any definite conclusions can be drawn.

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Author Notes

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